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Epistolary Conspiracy

THE ZINOVIEV LETTER. *By Lewis Chester, Stephen Fay and Hugo Young. 219 pages. Lippincott. $5.95.*

This is a book for devotees of conspiracy theories. In exposing a chain of complicity that took more than four decades to unravel, the author-sleuths, all British journalists, establish the conniving of the Conservative Party, the Foreign Office, the Daily Mail, British intelligence operatives and a group of White Russian émigré forgers.

The famous Zinoviev letter, which now serves as an example of the Red-scare technique at its sophisticated worst, purported to be a directive from Grigory Zinoviev, head of the Moscow-based Third International. It exhorted the British Communist Party to prepare for revolution and to foment insurrection in His Majesty's Armed Services. But while the forgery was in itself amateurish, its timely dissemination was a masterpiece: the Zinoviev letter brought about an electoral rout of Britain's first Labor government under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924, and blocked the ratification of an Anglo-Russian trade treaty for a number of years.

Thread: In getting an eyewitness account of the actual forgery in Berlin, the authors have a scoop which leads them to a brick-by-brick reconstruction of this bizarre political gimmick. Unfortunately, however, the book does not follow a clear narrative thread. It would have been far easier for the reader if the authors had started with a description of how a handful of youthful White Russian émigrés concocted the letter and planted it in Central European intelligence channels. From there the letter passed into the hands of the Foreign Office, British intelligence and finally into the hands of the Conservative Party and the press.

But while the conspirators succeeded brilliantly, England in 1924 fared badly. The British press of the day is shown to have been exceptionally slanted and unenterprising. Truth did not seem to be highly regarded by either the Times or the Daily Mail of that epoch. The Foreign Office, which originally authenticated the forgery on the scantiest of evidence, continues even today to sit on the departmental errors of the 1920s. The authors point out that the official attitude of the Foreign Office remains that the letter was, in fact, composed by Zinoviev.

Mangy: When Zinoviev said the letter was a complete forgery, this seemed to the British like a verification of its authenticity. The English public wanted a simplistic story; the Russian denial just didn't stand a chance. MacDonald, resenting his political enemies' concentration on the Zinoviev incident, complained during the 1924 election: "Why, instead of having a great battle on a political principle, do they go on sniffing about like mangy dogs on a garbage heap?"

The Conservative Party paid £5,000 sterling to the agents who handed them one of the great electoral victories of the century. While it is difficult to imagine a forgery of this magnitude getting past the microscope of today's Kremlinologists, the episode should serve as a warning. Even in one of the most civilized and presumably moral of contemporary states, a political party deliberately misled an entire people for narrow advantage.